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REMARKS BY

U.S. AMBASSADOR TO BANGLADESH DAN MOZENA INAUGURAL DINNER SOUTH ASIA WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS CONFERENCE: WOMEN LEADING FOR GENDER-RESPONSIVE GOVERNANCE DHAKA July 8, 2012

The alarm rang every morning at 4:30 ... every morning ... seven days a week, 365 days a year.

Life on a dairy farm is not easy ... our 40 cows had to be milked twice a day, everyday ... no exceptions.

My mother, father, brothers and I all threw ourselves out of our beds and headed out to the barn to begin the twice daily chores ... Mom lugged heavy baskets of fodder to feed the cows, then she joined us in milking the cows ... when finished we all headed to the house. We men folk all sat at the table, waiting for my mom to prepare the breakfast. When we finished eating, Mom kicked into even higher gear, cleaning the house, doing the laundry, doing all the food shopping, preparing all the meals and cleaning the dishes, taking care of us five kids, tending the garden, helping us kids with our homework, ensuring that we got a good education ... running a farm and raising a family ... my mom did it all ... never stopping until 10:30 at night when she dropped exhausted into bed, only to start the cycle all over again in a few hours, day after day ... week after week ... year after year.

I believe that many women in this room can relate to the life my mother led for decades. I believe millions of women throughout South Asia can relate to my mother's grueling schedule. As I grew up on the farm, I came to understand that my mother was the foundation not only of the farm, but also of our family. I remember questioning how my mother could possibly do all this work and still have time and patience to love and nurture her family.

I found the answer during later years when I lived with families in villages of Nepal, served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in then Zaire in central Africa, and worked as a diplomat for decades in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and numerous African countries. The explanation of my mother's ability to do the impossible year after year was simple ... she is a woman.

I saw that women in South Asia and women in central and southern Africa, too, do the impossible ... working non-stop morning to night, day after day, to provide for their families. Like my mother, these women were the foundation of their families.

Living and working in emerging countries for over four decades drove home to me a few key lessons. Most important of these is that if one is serious about sustainable development, then one must work with women. As a Peace Corps Volunteer working to help farmers improve chicken and egg production, I learned that lesson the hard way. But now I know, now I understand that women are the key, whether endeavoring to improve family well-being, family health, family nutrition or children's education ... women, indeed, are the key.

Just as women are key to building strong families, I believe that women are key to building nations that are peaceful, secure, prosperous, healthy and democratic.

This is where you, representatives of the region's women parliamentarians, come in. Who better than you can ensure that your country's women are full players in your country's development? Let me answer my own question: no one ... you are the best voice of women; you are best positioned to ensure that women are able to directly engage in, contribute to and benefit from your country's growth and development.

As you witnessed today, this conference provides a means for engaging with women parliamentarians from throughout the region. I know that you have already begun to exchange ideas, best practices, experiences of what works and doesn't work in promoting women's engagement in the political process; I know that you are already sharing models of how best to engage women in your nation's development and of how best to partner with civil society to ensure that the voice of women is heard in the lawmaking and policy formulation process.

I believe that women in general and you, women parliamentarians, in particular, are critical to democracy's success in South Asia since you best appreciate the high stakes involved; you understand that the issue at hand is the very nature of the society that your children will inherit from your generation.

This conference will enable you to build informal and formal networks with your counterparts from throughout the region. Your success in this regard will ensure that the information exchanges, ideas sharing and personal engagements of this four-day conference will endure well beyond the closing ceremony later this week.

I am proud that America and the United Kingdom's Department For International Development are supporting this conference through our partners The Asia Foundation and State University of New York's Center for International Development. I wish to thank, too, the Bangladesh National Assembly for its critical role in making this conference possible.

In closing, I wish you the very best as you engage over the next few days with your counterparts from throughout the region to find ways to ensure that the female half of your respective societies can be full participants in the political process to help ensure the best possible tomorrow for today's children.

Thank you.

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GR/ 2012